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Do you see what I see? : using students' self-portraits to gain new perspectives on teaching and learning

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Do You See What I See?
Using Student's Self-Portraits to Gain New Perspectives
On Teaching and Learning

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

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Do You See What I See? Using Students Self-Portraits to Gain New Perspectives on Teaching and Learning

Jordana Goldstein
Leadership in the Arts
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At a time when standardized tests are becoming more and more prevalent, children's artwork remains an underused source for understanding children in a more personal and authentic way. The purpose of this research and project is to better understand how and whether the combination of Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and student artwork can enhance teachers' knowledge of attitudes toward individual children, and whether it encourages teachers to include the arts as well as VTS processes in their classrooms.

Visual Thinking Strategies is a curriculum that uses visual images to teach students to think critically, listen respectfully, and share their prior knowledge with peers. A professional development session with twenty-one staff members of Rivington Street Charter School familiarized teachers with the VTS protocols and strategies for applying these in their own classrooms. A second session applied the VTS protocols to students' self-portraits. The teachers reflected upon these student-generated images without preconceived notions or judgments. Teachers gained a new outlook on the importance of relational capacity and the effect it can have on children's learning. The experience left a lasting impression on the participants and will serve to remind teachers to feature student work in creative and instructional processes.

Introduction

In most schools today, teachers are expected to use test scores, student writing, workbooks, rubrics, and other data to plan their lessons and modify instruction. It is very rare, however, for teachers to be given the opportunity to analyze student art for these same purposes. Why is this the case? Children's art opens the door to dimensions of the child that writing and tests may not reveal. One of the most important components of teaching is engaging the students in lessons. Without knowledge of their interests and dislikes, it is almost impossible to make a lesson engaging. Using art as a tool to understand their feelings, experiences, and interests can influence instructional planning. Open-ended non-judgmental discussions can lead to a more comfortable learning environment, enable students to take on multiple perspectives, and help them become respectful, active listeners. For this project, I chose to use student artwork as the focus of the processes and protocol of Visual Thinking Strategies with teacher participants. The purpose of this project is to better understand how the combination of Visual Thinking Strategies and student work can enhance teachers' understanding of individual children and encourage them to include the arts and VTS processes in their classrooms.

Visual Thinking Strategies

Schools today put more emphasis on high stakes testing than on the development of the whole child. The arts -- music, theatre, and visual -- arts are no longer considered priorities, and children's social, emotional, physical, and creative needs are subordinated to their academic progress. Art programs are being cut because, it is said, there is no money or time for them to fit into daily school schedules. But as the Visual Arts teacher in an elementary charter school that puts the majority of its focus, time, and money on state testing, I needed to find a way to contribute to the development of the whole child without succumbing to the testing world. I stumbled upon the work of Abigail Housen, a cognitive psychologist who believes that art can be used as tool for learning by focusing on the developmental stages of the child.

Visual Thinking Strategies is a curriculum that enables students to think critically, listen respectfully, and share their prior knowledge with their peers. The program *uses visual arts to teach thinking*. Abigail Housen has conducted a great deal of research that led her to develop a non-directive interview that allowed her to see into a student's thinking (Basic VTS, 2009,p.3). In her initial research, Housen asked participants to "simply talk about anything they see as they look at a work of art, saying whatever comes to mind. There are no directed questions or prompts to influence the viewer's process" (2009). She called this process the Aesthetic Development Interview. The Aesthetic Development Interview (ADI) can be broken down into five different stages. Each interview Housen conducted with participants or students can be categorized into one of these five stages. Below is a concise summary of the five Aesthetic Stages Housen formulated (2009):

Stage I *Accountive viewers* are storytellers. Using their senses, memories, and personal associations, they make concrete observations about a work of art that are woven into a narrative. Here, judgments are based on what is known and what is liked. Emotions color viewers' comments, as they seem to enter the work of art and become part of its unfolding narrative.

Stage II *Constructive viewers* set about building a framework for looking at works of art, using the most logical and accessible tools: their own perceptions, their knowledge of the natural world, and the values of their social, moral and conventional world. If the work does not look the way it is "supposed to"—if craft, skill, technique, hard work, utility, and function are not evident, or if the subject seems inappropriate—then these viewers judge the work to be "weird," lacking, or of no value. Their sense of what is realistic is the standard often applied to determine value. As emotions begin to go underground, these viewers begin to distance themselves from the work of art.

Stage III *Classifying viewers* adopt the analytical and critical stance of the art historian. They want to identify the work as to place, school, style, time and provenance. They decode the work using their library of facts and figures that they are ready and eager to expand. This viewer believes that properly categorized, the work of art's meaning and message can be explained and rationalized.

Stage IV *Interpretive viewers* seek a personal encounter with a work of art. Exploring the work, letting its meaning slowly unfold, they appreciate subtleties of line and shape and color. Now critical skills are put in the service of feelings and intuitions as these viewers let

underlying meanings of the work—what it symbolizes—emerge. Each new encounter with a work of art presents a chance for new comparisons, insights, and experiences. Knowing that the work of art's identity and value are subject to reinterpretation, these viewers see their own processes subject to chance and change.

Stage V *Re-creative viewers*, having a long history of viewing and reflecting about works of art, now “willingly suspend disbelief.” A familiar painting is like an old friend who is known intimately, yet full of surprise, deserving attention on a daily level but also existing on an elevated plane. As in all-important friendships, time is a key ingredient, allowing Stage V viewers to know the ecology of a work—its time, its history, its questions, its travels, its intricacies. Drawing on their own history with one work in particular, and with viewing in general, these viewers combine personal contemplation with views that broadly encompass universal concerns. Here, memory infuses the landscape of the painting, intricately combining the personal and the universal.

Housen's findings are very surprising. She found that age and gender do not play a role in determining which stage a participant falls into. She found that “exposure to art over time is the only way to develop. Without time and exposure, aesthetic development does not occur” (2009). An adult can be at the same stage or developmental level as a child with less education and fewer life experiences. She found that the majority of her participants, even those who were frequent museumgoers, fell into stages II-III, which is basically a beginning level. Her goal was to push all of her participants toward the last stage that encompasses both personal encounters and historic aspects of the artwork. Housen used these five stages in her creation of the VTS program. The curriculum allows participants who begin at stage I to grow and eventually begin to think like those who have reached more advanced stages. Housen teamed up with Phillip Yenawine to create a VTS curriculum that can be implemented in elementary schools within visual arts programs (Introduction to VTS, p.1) The program's introduction states the following:

VTS encourages:

- A personal connection to art from diverse cultures, times and places
- Confidence in one's ability to construct meaning from it
- Active class discussions and group problem solving
- Development of thinking and communication skills

- Development of writing skills
- Transference of these skills to other subject areas

The curriculum consists of ten lessons taught by classroom teachers ranging from Kindergarten to Fifth grade. Each lesson consists of three images that are “carefully sequenced from many different cultures and times, and in various mediums” (p.1). The most important tool in the curriculum is the series of questions that the facilitator or teacher uses. The language and progression of these three questions is key to the success of the lesson as well as the overall flow of discussion. The progression and specific language of the questions are: What is going on in the picture? What do you see that makes you say that? Lastly, What more can we find?

The progression of the lesson is as follows (p.1):

Teacher projects image on board, starting with the first image in the series. Students are given a minute to look at the image and formulate their responses. Teacher then asks the first open-ended question, “What is going on in the picture?” and the students use their prior knowledge to describe what they see in the image. The teacher follows their response with the second question, “What more can we find?” The students are asked to back up their interpretations and responses with evidence from the image. If the statement is an opinion without evidence, the teacher asks the follow up question, “What do you see that makes you say that?” (p.1). While students are sharing what they see, the facilitator or teacher points to the specific parts of the image to ensure that rest of the group is engaged. After each comment, the facilitator paraphrases the statement, scaffolds vocabulary, and links the comment to previous comments made. This aspect of the conversation allows students to become more aware “of their converging and diverging views, and of their developing skills at constructing shared, yet varied meanings” (p.1). Throughout the lesson, the facilitator does not play the role of a teacher. If a student asks a question, the facilitator simply repeats the question for the group without response. The students may either figure out the answer themselves, or rely on the responses from the other participants in the group. The role of the facilitator is to

simply ask the questions, paraphrase, link responses, scaffold vocabulary, and steer the discussion in purposeful way using the three questions.

What makes this different from any other teacher-led discussion is that VTS allows students to progress “from casual, random, idiosyncratic views to thorough, probing, reflective interpretations. They grow from finding only personal connections, to searching out the intentions of artists and dealing with elements of style (p.2). They begin by making connections to their own lives and prior knowledge and they then become able to create stories and develop their own individual voices. Group discussion allows students to first “depend on the group interaction and work toward individual problem solving motivated by personal interests” (p.2).

The emphasis on visual literacy is what made me appreciate and begin to implement this program within my own visual arts program. All schools offer programs and processes to help students learn to read. They begin by recognizing their letters and blending sounds and then eventually they progress to sounding out whole words and reading sentences. Before VTS, there was no parallel instruction for the development of visual literacy. One of the co-founders of VTS, Phillip Yenawine, states in his article, *Thoughts on Visual Literacy*, that “Visual literacy usually begins to develop as a viewer finds his/her own relative understanding of what s/he confronts, usually based on concrete and circumstantial evidence” (p.1). This does not mean, however, that more exposure to art necessarily leads to a higher degree of visual literacy. Yenawine believes that the “increased capacities require both time and broad exposure as well as educational interventions of various sorts” (Yenawine, 1997). He focuses many of his finding on the research conducted by Abigail Housen. Yenawine states that Housen “tells us that individuals at each of the five stages of aesthetic development can have strong connection to art, just as people have strong connections to literature regardless of how well they read personally” (Yenawine, p.2-3). An emphasis on visual literacy is put into place in Housen’s stages III, IV, and V. In stage III, “The goals are to acquire and retain information about art and to classify according to the systems of art historical scholarship” (p.3). The last and final stages require no intervention from a facilitator, but the participant becomes self-guided and the learning comes from within the individual. In conclusion, Yenawine believes that “In order to advance in aesthetic understanding

and the set of skills which broaden them, visual literacy, viewers need long term, graduated support, like that provided for readers” (p.3). With the development of this type of literacy, advancement in other forms of meaning making will continue to develop. Yenawine and Housen combined their two experiences and expertise to create the VTS curriculum which “Relies specifically on art images because they provide clear reflection, a powerful tool with which to engage students, and are open to multiplicity or interpretations” (Landorf, 2006). In turn, the program allows for students to think more “critically, analytically, learn cooperatively, entertain more than one point of view, and to synthesize information (2006).

The Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum focuses on students ranging from Kindergarten to Eighth grade. Adults, however, can benefit from the program as well. Recently, Visual Thinking Strategies has partnered with the Education section of The New York Times. Every week, an image is posted on their Learning Network page “without a caption or any other clues about its origins, then invite students to write in to discuss what they see in it. Full information about the image is posted 24 hours later” (What’s Going On In The Picture,” 2013). Readers are able to post their answers to the VTS questions on the comment section of the page and are able to read other comments based on the same image. Readers are also able to check back in the following day and read about the artist’s actual intent, a validation of opinion that would not be included in a discussion with students because the point would specifically be to elicit individual, varied responses and allow students to come to their own conclusions about which might be valid. Thus, the series in the *New York Times* is based on a very a different application of VTS, and readers are enjoying posting their opinions and checking in to see if their opinions were spot on.

Visual Thinking Strategies: Image Selection

The images that pertain to each grade level are purposeful and geared to the developmental stages that are typical of that age specific group. Based on Housen’s research on aesthetic development, image selection is specifically geared toward the participant’s interests, areas of strength and growth. The Visual Thinking Strategies

Guidelines for Image Selection, states that “early viewing is best taught by activating learners -- helping them look carefully, think about what they see, and articulate their responses to it. We feel that this is most productively done in the context of discussions among groups of peers--people with equal experience and exposure to art, who therefore speak the same language, as it were” (p.2). Through discussions, students are able to learn from one another and understand different perspectives on the same image. Individuals are able to grow with the help of their peers. While choosing artwork for each grade level, VTS believes that it is imperative that the work be accessible for the viewer. They usually ask themselves: “Are they likely to recognize what they observe? Can they make reasonable associations with it based on what they already know?” (p.3). If there is no clear connection, then the student will not be able to make any connections or associations with the image to any of their prior knowledge. The image selected must also be open to multiple interpretations. In the beginning stages of VTS, the messages and meanings from the images are very clear; but once the participants progress in the curriculum, images “that are less clear are appropriate, [and they] function to encourage speculation, questioning, and complex interpretations” (p.3).

When choosing an age appropriate image, VTS theorists believe that diversity, themes, and media play a huge role. Choosing artwork from different cultures broadens the student’s appreciation for art from around the world, allows them to make meaningful connections, and helps them understand different perspectives. Each lesson encompasses a different theme. Theorists believe that “given the existence of much continuity and transcendence in themes, ideas, subjects and values in art throughout time and cultures, it is useful to structure this concept into any organized presentation of art” (p.4). It is important that all the themes relate to the children of that specific age group. For example, the images in the Kindergarten curriculum are full of people, animals, objects and activities that are easily recognizable for them (Summary of the Visual Thinking Strategies; Grades K-5 Curriculum, 2009, p.2). In Third grade, the images become more complex and begin to “focus on family and peer interaction, depicting relationships, friendships, and also independence” (p.5); while Fourth grade focuses on the students’ “environments and lives, but address more problematic issues and are more ambiguous in meaning” (p.7). These images enable the student to formulate their own interpretations.

Along with age specific themes, diverse media also play a large role. VTS can be conducted during museum visits as well as in the classroom. Theorists recommend paintings, drawings, photographs, sculptures, and prints of all types for museum visits as long as they are easily visible. They recommend using mostly two-dimensional art in the classroom, primarily because the images are being projected onto a two dimensional surface (guidelines, 2009, p. 5). The use of different media broadens the participant's knowledge of art history and allows them to make connections to real world experiences. Paintings are important to use because they are used in most cultures and the artwork that students create themselves is usually done in this medium (p.5). VTS theorists stress the importance of using photography. They believe that a participant cannot "become a visually literate person today without learning to interpret photos; we see great numbers of them, mostly without considering the ways they are used to manipulate our responses" (p.5) Photography also allows participants to put themselves in the artist's shoes. Students are able to pretend that they are the artists who captured the specific image and this helps them better understand the process the artist went through to achieve the final product. They can imagine each of the choices the artist had to make in terms of lighting, angle, and presentation.

Sequencing of images is the final stage in image selection. VTS theorists recommend starting with a simple image that has fewer meanings and less density, and then moving to a more difficult image later on in the lesson. The complex image includes "greater ambiguity of meaning, where ferreting out signifying details is more time consuming, where more of the meaning is communicated through style and materials than through iconography or subject, where symbolism and metaphor are more important" (p.6).

Teachers are discouraged from using several types of images for beginner participants. VTS theorists believe that images with simple meanings or only one meaning should be avoided. Illustrations, cartoons, and advertisements usually only have one meaning and will in turn lead to an unproductive discussion. If the outcome of the conversation will lead to a negative experience, the image should be avoided. It is stated in the *Guidelines for Image Selection for Beginning Viewers* that:

Images depicting violence, specific political stances, specific religious

imagery, nudity, overt sexuality and sensuality, and grotesque or macabre subjects may cause teachers difficulty because the values expressed are in conflict with a child's—or his or her own. The point of initial forays into art is neither to challenge deeply held views nor to force conversation about taboo subjects, but to encourage looking, thinking and the articulation of well-founded opinions.

Choosing an image that is inappropriate for the specified age group will only end in an unpleasant situation for all. When planning, it is imperative that the images be looked at from the participants' point of view. Theorists also recommend avoiding abstractions, images of still lives, as well as decorative arts and architecture, primarily because the meanings are more difficult to identify.

Each developmental stage requires a different series of images that evoke different feelings and emotions. For students ranging in age from 5-7, VTS believes that the artwork should “should be fairly obvious and simple to allow for students to discuss them insightfully in terms of concrete observations—which is the arena in which they operate” (p.7). They are inclined to find, name, list, count and identify gestures, and different expressions. Below is a list of themes that is necessary for beginning viewers according to the *Guidelines for Image Selection*:

Themes

- Family, parent(s) and child
- Play, work, school
- Love
- Day/night
- Seasons
- City/town/country/water

The simplicity and age appropriateness of these themes enables students to learn from one another and understand that everyone brings their own experiences to the conversation. As the viewers progress, they become able to “give detailed observations, will listen to other's points of view, and will explain their answers as a matter of course” (p.8). In the more experienced stages, the participants are more open to a change in perspective once another opinion is verbalized. They are more likely to see things from

another participant's point of view and understand that each of us comes from a different place. It is recommended to represent both genders, diverse cultures and to "emphasize images where the character and personality of people comes richly into play, as well as complex settings, and begin to introduce issues that have to do with time: of day, of year not so much era" (p.9). Comparing and contrasting images can be introduced at the more experienced levels. Participants are able to make connections within a series of images and understand their similarities and differences. Once the participants have been involved with VTS for several years, it is important to keep them engaged. At this stage, theorists believe that participants get caught up in technique and logic (p.10). Participants begin to believe that things should appear as they are "supposed" to be. VTS believes that "This is a good time to concentrate on images that address what the artist was either feeling or thinking. Regarding the latter, self-portraits are recommended; it might be useful to have groups of pictures by single artists, to allow them to look more deeply into an individual's way of working, choice making, and concerns" (p. 10). Self-portraits allow for several different interpretations with a focus on facial expression and mood.

The founders of Visual Thinking Strategies believe that only master artworks are appropriate materials for the process. In our email correspondence, Nick Gardner, a managing director at VTS, stated that although they would like to use student work, the work usually lacks the "layers of ambiguity and intrigue that 'master' work contains" (Gardner, personal communication, December 12, 2012). He did, however, mention that they are conducting their own research regarding this topic; other young adults favor using non-masterwork. In another email correspondence, Phillip Yenawine, one of the co-founders of VTS, states that in order for "discussions to be rich, images must have layers of meaning and ambiguity as well as inherent interest to the viewer" (personal communication, December 18, 2012). He goes on to state that work created by a child or untrained artist may lack the interest needed for the rich conversations. Yenawine also states that is "virtually impossible for them to incorporate these aspects of art in their work." The fact that children's art was not chosen as a tool for VTS was a conscious decision; the goal of VTS is not to learn about the artist and the reasons they created the work, but to grow as a participant, observer, and group member. In our email correspondence, Yenawine explains that adult or master art is chosen mainly because

“adult artists often make decisions that don’t seem to come from conscious thought; but that doesn’t mean that others can’t find meanings in what they do and choose to present” (Yenawine, personal communication, December 18, 2012). For children, however, it only makes sense to use VTS as a critique method “when students actually have some command in techniques and have taken time regarding their choice of subjects, projects, media, etc, rarely the case with ‘assignments’” (Yenawine, personal communication, December 18, 2012). Yenawine believes that children should not need to be aware of the choices they are making or reflective about it. I, however, disagree. Children are able to understand why they choose a certain color and why they create a shape of a certain size. One key component to allowing a child to share is the right questioning. Yenawine may believe that the VTS prescribed questioning may not be the appropriate set of questions for this manner. For the purposes of my project, the children were not involved in the conversation and were not able to explain their reasoning behind each of their choices. As the children’s teacher, I was able to discuss their work with them prior to the sessions and ask them the appropriate questions. This one on one time allowed me to have a deeper look into the child’s conscious choices.

The Prospect School: The Descriptive Review

Pat Carini’s “Descriptive Review” is a discussion-based process similar in many ways to Visual Thinking Strategies, although the focus is, specifically, on children’s work rather than master artists’ work. Carini’s work revolves around the idea that administrators, teachers, and parents tend to lose sight of their main goals when pressured by the demands of standardization and high stakes testing. The main focus, the needs of the child, is neglected and has the potential to leave a significant mark on the child’s education. Co-founders of the Prospect School, Carini believes that as educators “we must ensure that education starts and builds from the strengths of children and teachers and values human capacity” (Himley, 2011, p.5). Along with her peers, Carini created a “descriptive review” process whose primary emphasis is on learning “more about a

child's particular strengths as a learner and thinker by describing their writing and drawing" (p.6). In a group setting, teachers are able to reflect upon the child's social, academic, and psychological behavior through analysis of their work, story telling, and word associations. The process stresses "doing and reflecting and doing again and about trusting ordinary people to draw on the powerful but ordinary skill of observing, documenting, and describing" (p.6). The program can be used for other purposes besides learning about a child. Himley states that the program can be used to rework an activity or type of instruction in the classroom. It can also be used to dissect a classroom and even school setting in order to create the best learning environment for the students.

The review is a well thought out, democratic inquiry process that includes specific roles and rules in order to be administered properly. Prior to the review session, a focus topic or focus question is presented to the participants, giving them ample time to prepare for the session. During the review, group members take on the roles of chairperson, presenter, and note-taker (p.7). The chairperson acts as the facilitator during the session and ensures that "the review follows the procedures, offers restatements at key moments, and calls for an evaluation of the process at the end" (p.6). The presenter is the teacher, parent, or administrator who has come forth with the focus question or issue that is being reviewed; while the note-taker collects information, organizes notes, and saves the information for use a later date.

One might assume that when the process is first presented, the majority of the focus questions for the sessions would revolve around a major issue or problem arising in the school. Carini states that this is usually not the case. Most educators "want the help of other staff members in getting to know better a child who often seems not to be visible in the class" (Carini, 2011, p.10). Teachers use this opportunity to find more ways to connect with the child and not allow them to slide by without getting the attention they deserve. Over time, the process continues to be altered to fit the needs of the participants by including parents in the process. The program also stresses confidentiality and respect. Carini states in "*Descriptive Review of the Child: Observing and Describing Babies and Adolescents*" (Carini, 2011), that the "Descriptive Review of the Child values that interiority and strives to honor it. For all [the] reasons, the confidentiality of what is said is an unchanging requirement for all Descriptive Reviews" (p.20).

The review begins with all the chairs arranged in a circle so all participants feel included and are visible to one another (Carini, 2011, p.11). The presenting teacher and chair agree upon a reflection word that “seems close to how she experiences the child [who] is going to [be] described (p.11). The remainder of the group writes down all words that come to mind associated with the key word. For example, if the chair chooses the word “slip,” each participant writes down their word associations and shares their reflection with the group. The chairs then reminds the participants that “[they] will not apply the reflection to the child, rather it will serve as surround and context for the picture of her that the presenting teacher will paint” (Carini, 2011, p.11). After the initial conversation, the chair introduces the child, including their family background, educational history, and any other information they see necessary. From this point on, the participants are able to weigh in with their opinions without judgment, ask questions, and give suggestions and feedback to the chair (p.12).

The aspect of the Descriptive Review that caught my attention was the emphasis they put on the process of examining student work. VTS chooses to use only master or experienced artists’ work as a focus for discussion. The Descriptive Review takes a different approach when it comes to analyzing student work. Patricia Carini states in her article, *Descriptive Review of Works: Guidelines for Describing Visual Works*, that using student work “[offers] glimpses of a side of the child that may not be so visible in the intense surround of the classroom” (p.37). The Prospect school categorizes as “work,” “anything that children make, construct, write, including but not limited to drawings; paintings; collage; sculpture; sewing; block, wood, Lego, and junk constructions; photographs and film; stories; poem, reports, and informational writing” (Carini, 2001, p.27). The work is used as a vehicle, but is not the only means by which they examine a child. Along with the student work, they have daily and weekly observations, descriptive recordings, and curriculum notes collected as a staff (p.28). During the Descriptive Review process, the group does not seek to “categorize children according to personality types or developmental stages” (p.28). They are more interested in looking at the content the child used to create their work and the progression she has made over time. If the child used the same themes multiple times, it can be very telling about the state the child was in. The process for observing work begins with sharing first impressions followed by

a paraphrasing of impressions by the chair. The chair constantly links the impressions back towards the work, always making sure the participant using evidence from the work (Carini, 2007, p.38). This step in the process is very similar to that of Visual Thinking Strategies. During a VTS session, the participants discuss what they believe is going on while pulling evidence from what they see in the image. While the participant is sharing, the facilitator constantly points to the area of interest to the participant grounding their comment for the remainder of the group. The Descriptive Process categorizes this step as a “re-telling of the work by attending to the surface content and elements” (p.38). This step in the process establishes a ground for a later conversation that will dive deeper into the description of the child. The Descriptive Review uses an aspect of the Visual Thinking Strategy to further understand the work of the child before actually discussing the child’s needs. In this step of the process, the facilitator paraphrases what the participant stated in order to capture the comment and alter the language for the reminder of the group to comprehend. The facilitator is also able to give feedback to the participant and explain how and why the artist created the work in the manner they did. During VTS, however, the facilitator does not give any answers, but simply guides the conversation by asking the three questions and paraphrasing what the participants share. The facilitator is only able to paraphrase the comment without answering or adding his or her own comments into the response.

The Descriptive Review process is used as an aid to teachers and parents to better understand the needs of the child discussed. The discussion is not used in any negative manner. Every comment shared is confidential, and the chair leaves with a better idea of how to help the child reach and meet her/his goals. The Descriptive Review Process uses student work as a way of looking at a child without overemphasizing the child’s academic deficiencies. Carini states that “it is a way of looking that aims at recognition of each child’s and person’s capacities and strengths, understanding these to be indispensable for the child’s education, including for the negotiation of any hard spots and bumps in the road she may encounter as grows and learns (Carini, 2007, p.39). Their process, similar to mine, brings adults, whether teachers or parents, to discuss a child and their needs. The collaborative aspect of both processes allows for all parties, including the child, to understand the necessary steps needed to ensure that all children, especially the one

discussed, are supported and are able to grow successfully into members of our society.

Self Portraits

Starting at a very young age, most children begin their art careers by creating images of themselves. Over time, they begin to include family members, houses, and their interests. The progression over time tends to be very telling about a child's emotional and social behaviors. For the sake of this project, I chose to use two of my student's self portraits as the basis of discussion with teachers. In an article titled, "Artistic Differences," John Healey states that "we have the opportunity to help our students identify who we are and how we are different," with the use of self portraits. Similar to the way I implement this assignment in my classroom, Healey believes that all students should be given the same directions. Students are instructed to include as much of their body as possible, but must include their head. Once they outline themselves, they can begin adding in all of their information. Healy describes information as "hair color, skin tone, facial features, as well as clothing they are wearing" (Healy, 2003, pg. 44). Students with disabilities, glasses and any other accessory are encouraged to incorporate what makes them special into their work. Finally, Healey acknowledges the importance of self-portraits to the child. He believes that "observing and celebrating the differences in our students' artwork can help to bring the children together, enhance their feelings of self-worth and open their minds to new and positive learning experiences" (pg.46). Self-portraits are an easy way to get to know students and learn about them through their art. The information taken from the portraits can be used later on in other lessons depending on what interests them.

Arts Integration

VTS is a program that can be altered and incorporated into other disciplines besides art. Teachers can use the strategies of VTS in their classrooms in many different ways. However, when most teachers are asked to incorporate art into their curriculum or daily lessons, their first reaction usually is, "But I am not an artist." Contrary to this statement,

it doesn't take an artist to interlace art or any subject into a curriculum. In an article titled, *(Doing) Art as an Interdisciplinary Didactic Principle*, Anja Kraus states that "art could be used in schools wherever interdependencies and contexts are the learning focus" (2008, p.275). It does not matter what the content is or the age of the learners, art can be intertwined into the experience. Although Kraus believes that there needs to be a shift and revision of instruction and learning, she believes that "open ended and contingent aspects of individual experiences and competences can be tracked down and structured by a learning environment based on artwork and artistic principles" (p.275). She continues to state that although art can be used as a tool, most teachers ignore this idea in formal schooling today. In her experiments with art and other content areas, Kraus found that artwork motivates and engages students, but the teachers who participated had a difficult time involving the art and changing their day-to-day routines. The teachers also felt that it was difficult to "adapt to the openness of art-supported teaching and learning" (p. 283). These statements give a huge insight into the push back and hesitations most general education teachers have when attempting to create interdisciplinary lessons.

In her research, Karen DeMoss focuses on the underlying question, "If learning with and through the arts is correlated with higher achievement and other evidence of learning, what special qualities of arts education might be supporting students' growth?" (DeMoss, p.2). Her goal was not only to find the answer to this question, but also to understand from a student standpoint how arts integration plays a role in the learning process. DeMoss' study focused around Chicago Arts Partners in Education (CAPE) schools. The CAPE schools partner artists with teachers in classroom environments to collaborate on units and implement lessons in a team teaching style. DeMoss states that "students in these schools are afforded learning environments that aim to engender growth in academic understanding, in arts knowledge, and in affective domains such as cooperation, interest, and self esteem" (p.3). While observing, DeMoss found that arts integrated teaching encompassed clear activities, expectations, and outcomes and the students had a clear role in the learning process from start to finish. Both teachers participated equally, modeling the correct behavior for collaboration for the students. DeMoss states that during instructional time, an emphasis is usually put on either the arts or the academic content area. While the "arts content receives priority, there is typically

very little inclusion of the academic content area during art instruction,” and while the “priority is the academic instruction, the arts learning tends to be reduced to activities designed to summarize content, rather than becoming applied concepts for investigating and expanding content” (DeMoss, p.7). Students also voiced that the integration of arts made the learning in their classrooms for more fun and enjoyable. In her findings, DeMoss realized that students’ knowledge from arts integrated lessons can play a crucial role in the culture of any learning environment by providing a more positive and purposeful connection to the content being taught.

Schools today do not need to be as extreme as the CAPE schools, but the general education teachers can use art as a tool to reinforce a math concept or introduce a social studies lesson. There are innumerable ways for teachers to make their lessons more engaging and “fun” for students. In a small school in Vermont, teachers find several ways to engage students who are struggling academically. Prior to integrating arts across the curriculum at Robinson Elementary, teachers hardly used any form of the arts in their lessons. Teachers were reluctant and nervous to incorporate dance, music, visual arts, and even theatre because they were not experts themselves. In the article, “Teaching and Learning with The Arts,” the publisher Allen Raymond discusses how teachers were given the opportunity to learn how to play different instruments, become experienced with different dance styles, and attend a variety of art workshops. These professional development sessions allowed the teachers to become more confident in their own classrooms. Raymond describes a scenario in which one teacher states that in “ ‘geography [they] were studying different regions in a country, and as part of the study, [they] learned how to perform dances associated with the northeastern region- such as jazz from New York City’ ” (Raymond, 2007, p.36). The teacher goes on to state that by the end of the lesson, the two students who were most reluctant to participate in the beginning of the lesson were the two most engaged students by the end. Although this is only one example of how the arts can be incorporated into any lesson, the lasting impression that was left on those two students is remarkable. The students will never forget this lesson and will more inclined to participate in future lessons simply because of the enthusiasm and effort of the teacher.

Getting to Know the Child as an Individual

When faced with high expectations from the administration, school boards and parents, it is very easy for teachers to forget that the students in all of our classes are individuals with unique personalities from different cultures and families. Forming a relationship with the student is key in the success of the student academically. In her article, “*Valuing Diversity, Student-Teacher Relationships that Enhance Achievement*,” author Linda Jacobsen focuses on how “teachers can become more aware of and sensitive to the specific needs of students and to both the factors that negatively affect students’ attitudes the educational process and those that enhance their learning experiences” (2000, p.50). The individualized relationships in the classroom begin with a comfortable and safe environment. The teacher must also create positive learning experiences for all students in order for them to feel as comfortable and motivated as possible. Students need to feel appreciated and successful in school in order to perform to their highest academic potential. Jacobsen believes that it is necessary for teachers to create a “familial-type environment in which student and teacher share a commitment to each student’s success supports students’ learning processes even after requisite skills have been acquired” (2000, p.55). This can occur once an individualized relationship is formed. Jacobsen recommends having students write down their interests, hobbies, likes and dislikes, where their family is from, as well as what types of learners they are. Students appreciate the opportunity to be honest and open to their teachers. This task not only informs the teacher’s instruction, but it can give teachers insight to a student’s life outside of school. Jacobsen recommends that prior to completion of the “getting to know you” activity, teachers should model the activity by opening part of their lives to the students. This action allows the teacher to be viewed as person and not just the instructor of the class. Another way teachers can get to know their students on a deeper level is by having open-ended discussions without judgment. An understanding can be made between the teacher and students that they can speak freely without fearing that their peers or teacher will judge their thoughts and remarks. This can be a hard concept for young students to grasp, but if the right classroom environment is formed, most students will already feel as if they can speak freely without consequence

Description of School and Art Program

My integrative Master's Project took place during two professional development sessions at Rivington Charter School (all names are pseudonyms), a public charter school located in Queens, N.Y. The school opened in 2010 as part of a local group of community members' initiative to provide a better opportunity for a rigorous curriculum and structured school setting to combat the cycle and negative consequences of poverty for Queens' families and their children. Rivington currently serves approximately 420 neighborhood children from kindergarten to fifth grade. The most recent statistical data available for Rivington comes from the New York Department of Education's report card for the 2011-2012 school year. The report showed enrollment of low-income, racial minority students: 88% of Rivington's students are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch; 96% of its enrolled students identified as Black or African-American; and 4% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Hired staff consists of seventeen classroom teachers, five special area teachers, and one principal, two deans, and two registrars, one parent representative and 3 custodians. Out of the twenty-seven staff members listed, only six of the twenty-seven are male.

As the Art Director and Art Educator at Rivington Charter School since the school opened, I have had the opportunity to grow and alter the program as I see fit. During a regular school week, I teach each class for one forty-five minute session except for third grade, which I am able to teach twice per week. During our weekly sessions, we tend to focus on an interdisciplinary assignment that either correlate with a book we read, a science topic, or a social studies area that we previously studied. Each of the units aligns with one of the New York State standards for that specific grade level. All students are given the same assignment, but they are able to execute their project however they desire as long as it fits into the guidelines provided. As an art educator, I try to reiterate concepts taught in the classrooms, but in a different manner. Some students are visual learners; some are auditory, while others may be kinesthetic learners. It is important to reach all of the multiple intelligences. I believe that art can be used as tool to reach all learners.

Although, I am only able to create art with each child once per week, the children understand the importance art can have on their academic, social, and behavioral needs. I am constantly collaborating with classroom teachers and other special teachers on how they can incorporate art into their lessons. Whether it is introducing a new topic in math, reflecting on a story, or even creating an obstacle course in Physical Education, the students and teachers are well aware of the importance art can have on their instruction and learning. A component of art can be infused into any lesson, homework assignment or project. Understanding the purpose and role art can have in an assignment is what is most important. As part of my Art Program at Rivington Charter School, I have incorporated the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum. During one of my two sessions per week with Third Grade, I implement the prescribed curricula. Prior to implementing this program, I attended a two-day training at the Brooklyn Museum of Art in Brooklyn, New York. The program consists of ten lessons per grade level with a set of three images per forty-five minute lesson. Over the course of seven months, I have completed one “year” of VTS with my students and have begun the second year. I conduct three different sessions per week with 26 students in each session. Since September, I have noticed growth in all of the students who participate. Students who tend to be reserved, and timid have opened up and felt safe enough to share their opinions. The students have become more respectful to one another, listen attentively to their peer’s comments, and are able to agree or disagree with one another without any arguments. The students are able to discuss topics that they have not been exposed to yet in their classrooms, such as race, ethnicity, age, and gender. After several sessions implementing VTS with students, I felt that the program was a necessary tool for each teacher to use in their own classrooms. The series of questions allows the teacher to be a guide in the learning process, without giving any answers. The students become in charge of their own learning and investigations through the analysis of art.

VTS Professional Development at Rivington Charter School:

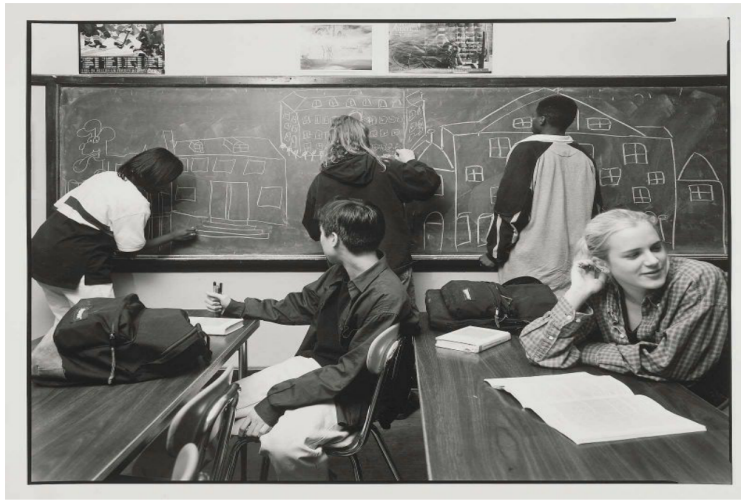
Every Monday after school ends, the teaching staff at Rivington has the opportunity to participate in a professional learning session with either the whole staff or

their perspective teams. During these sessions, the teachers are able to learn and grow together as professionals. This allotted time slot in our weekly schedules was the perfect venue for the introduction of this new teaching style to the Rivington Staff. I decided that I would conduct two professional development sessions that incorporate VTS in different ways. The first session was held on Monday, December 3, 2012 (See Appendix for session Agenda). The purpose of this session was to introduce the staff to the VTS program and protocol and to immerse them in the experiences as if they were students in own classroom. The session began with a description of what VTS is. Below is an overview of information presented to teachers:

VTS is a school curriculum and teaching method that:

- Develops critical thinking, communication and visual literacy skills through an artistic medium
- Engages learners in a rigorous process of examination and meaning-making through visual art (i.e. dissecting the cover of a book)
- Measurably increases observation skills, evidential reasoning, and speculative abilities
- Uses facilitated discussion to enable students to practice respectful, democratic, collaborative problem solving skills that over time transfer to other classroom interactions and beyond

This brief introduction enabled teachers to understand why and how VTS can be used in their classrooms. It is difficult to understand the impact VTS can have on a student without participating and immersing yourself in a session. Following the brief introduction, I re-created the VTS experience for the teachers. The image below from the VTS website was posted for the teachers viewing. No information regarding the artist, background of the image, or title of the image was given.



(Nicholas Nixon, 11th Grade English Boston Latin School,
<http://vtsweb.org/content/0394-nixon>)

Following VTS protocol, I invited all teachers to take a minute to think about what was going on in the picture. Once the minute ended, I phrased the first VTS question, “What is going on in the picture?” Teachers were able to share their opinions pulling evidence from the image to support their beliefs. After each comment, I asked the follow up question, “What do you see that makes you say that?” This question is only asked if the participant did not use evidence from the image to support their comment. If the participant supported their response with direct evidence from the image, I then paraphrased their comment using different language making sure to scaffold my vocabulary. The use of paraphrasing is significant because it validates the participant’s opinion and allows them to feel as if they are a necessary and important part of the group. After paraphrasing, I then followed up with the last VTS question, “What more can we find?” This process continues until the comments become similar or about fifteen to twenty minutes pass. Throughout the conversation, it is important that the facilitator does not affirm the participant. During VTS, there are no right or wrong answers, it is simply what *you* believe is going on in the image. It is also important that the facilitator points to the areas of the image that is being discussed, as well as links comments together while

paraphrasing. After about thirty minutes of discussion, I ended the VTS session and opened the conversation up for initial reactions from the participants. Following this section of the session, I conducted one more VTS cycle using the following image:



(Edouard Manet, The Execution of Emperor Maximilian of Mexico,
<http://vtsweb.org/content/0115-manet>)

The second cycle allowed for teachers to better understand the role of the facilitator. They were able to pay closer attention to the pointing, paraphrasing, questioning, linking and listening aspects of the protocol. Following the second cycle, the session transitioned to what this program can do at Rivington. VTS has the potential to create better critical thinking skills. I discussed how using VTS can help students with developing observation skills, drawing conclusions, using evidential reasoning, brainstorming and understanding other perspectives, as well as revising and elaborating on their thinking. The conversation then transitioned into how each teacher can incorporate aspects of VTS into their daily instruction. I discussed how the technique

could be used to introduce a read aloud focusing on the cover of a book, journal writing, or even a social studies or science hook to kick off a unit. To conclude the session, each teacher or participant was able to take away at least one way they could incorporate the strategies into their upcoming lessons.

With the success of the first professional development session at Rivington Charter School, I was eager to continue my project. On Monday, January 14, 2013, I conducted my second and final professional development focusing on Visual Thinking Strategies. During this session, the focus was placed on the artwork rather than the process. For the purposes of this project, I used student created artwork instead of masterwork. As stated previously, the founders of Visual Thinking Strategies believe that the artwork used should be created by an artist whose work displays layers of meaning incorporating different cultures and themes. They do not believe that children have the ability to do so at such a young age. I, however, disagree. Children are able to understand why they chose a certain color and why they created a shape a certain size. Yenawine may believe that the VTS prescribed questioning may not be the appropriate set of questions for this manner. For the purposes of my project, the children were not involved in the conversation and were not able to explain their reasoning behind each of their choices. As the children's teacher, I was able to discuss with them prior to the sessions their work and ask them the appropriate questions. This one on one time allowed me to have a deeper look into the child's conscious choices.

Prior to the second session, I chose two of my student's self portraits to be the focal point. To kick off every year at Rivington, each grade level creates a different version of a self-portrait. Kindergarteners created paper collage self portraits, first through third grade created oil pastel self portraits, fourth grade created stain glass-like self portraits, and fifth grade created larger watercolor self portraits. I begin my school year with self-portraits mainly because they are a great tool to get to know the children as individuals. Children often open up when they are creating an image of something familiar to them. This allows me to better understand where the child is coming from and what some of their interests may be. With each grade level, we spend a significant amount of time focusing on drawing our features proportionally, observing our specific facial features in the mirror, and creating our exact skin tones. For the sake of this

project, I focused on the first to third grade oil pastel self-portraits. Because of the diversity at Rivington, I feel that discussing our cultures and family backgrounds is a significant step in creating self-portraits. In order to create our skin tones properly, we all start with the same shade of brown and either blend in pink or white to match our skin. This exercise enables the students to feel comfortable with and accepting of each other and with me. Once the students have completed their portraits in pencil, we begin to discuss the background. I explain to the children that they welcome to to draw themselves at their favorite place. This place can be their home, their favorite restaurant, store, or even park. They can even be with their favorite people. They are then able to create their backgrounds and color their portraits in using oil pastels. The products are beautiful representations of each child at that moment in their life. Students tend to include their favorite sports teams, food items, family members, weather, and some times even animals. The portraits were completed prior to the second professional development with the teachers at Rivington Charter School.

The second session did not involve an overview of the process and protocols of VTS. It began with a written reflection for teachers to reflect upon their instructional time between sessions. Teachers were able to write about whether they had implemented any of the strategies or if they planned to in the future. We then transitioned to two cycles of VTS with Rivington student work instead of masterwork. Without discussing the artist's age, gender, or name, I projected the following image on the board.



Using the Visual Thinking Strategies, we began the session. I asked the same three questions:

- What's going on in this picture?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?

After about twenty minutes, we transitioned to the second and last image for the session. The same protocol was in place. I did not share the artist, his/her age or gender. The following image was projected:



Once the session was complete, I shared both artists' information with the teacher participants. The teachers reflected upon their assumptions and opinions they had about the child during the session and compared them with the prior knowledge they had regarding the child. If the child was not in the teacher's class, they reflected on assumptions the artwork led them to believe about the two children.

Findings: Visual Thinking Strategies Session One

The two professional development sessions held at Rivington Charter School were very informational regarding the Visual Thinking Strategies program and the positive impact it can have on the education of our students. During and after the first session, the teacher participants were given the opportunity to reflect on the process. The majority of teachers praised the program for the openness and non-judgmental aspect of the conversation. Lauren, a Third Grade Teacher (all names are pseudonyms) stated,

“Something [she] continues to think about is how we speak about creating this perfect classroom environment and developing a specific classroom environment by having students listen to others thinking. This is such a subjective and opinionated thing. It is more important to develop that skill that it is okay that so and so thinks that and you think something different. The idea that everybody has their own opinions and their opinions can be different and it is okay for that all adds to the development of our classroom environment. VTS does that without putting an emphasis on our differences. The flow of conversation allows for this type of respect.”

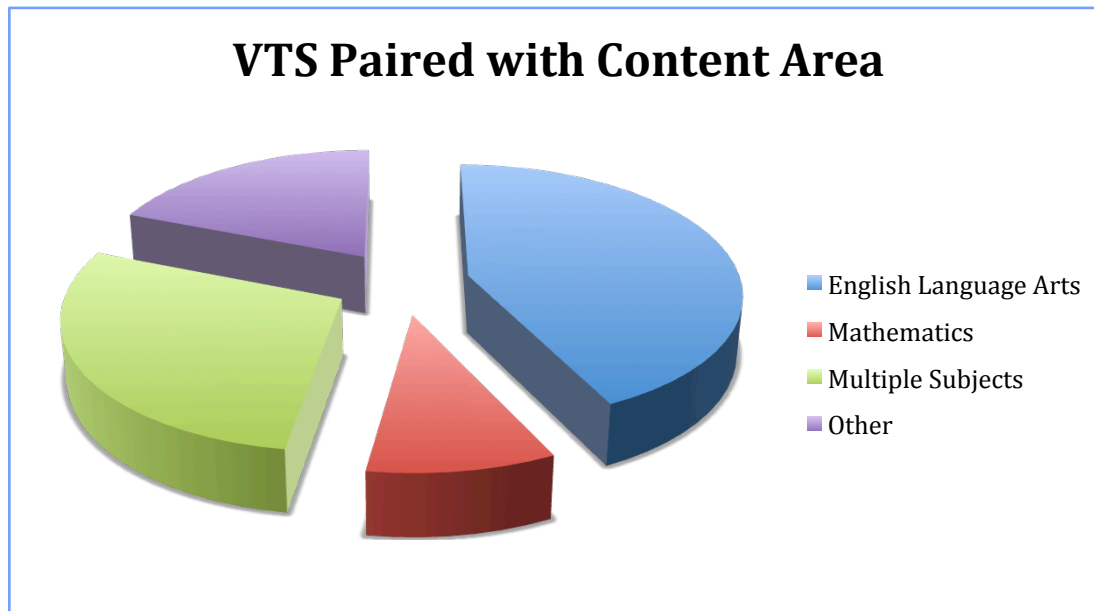
Lauren’s comment was very similar to those of some of the other participants. It is very difficult to build a classroom environment in which every opinion is heard and respected. Students ranging from Kindergarten to Twelfth grade have difficulties understanding that we each come from different backgrounds with different religions, cultures, and most importantly different “backpacks” or prior experiences. The conversation using the Visual Thinking Strategies promotes this type of environment and allows for teachers to build upon in their classrooms.

Prior to the end of the first session, my intentions were for teachers to honestly and openly think about how they could incorporate VTS into their planning and instruction. I asked each participant to answer the following two questions:

1. How can you incorporate what you have learned during this session into your classroom?
2. In what ways do you see VTS supporting the academic and social development of your scholars (students)?

The responses to the first question were not surprising. I foreshadowed the outcome of this session mainly because I felt a huge connection to the program and knew that other teachers would as well. The data collected for the first session is charted on the graph

below. The participants focused on a certain content area that they believed VTS could have a large impact on in their classrooms.



Nine out of the total twenty-one participants stated that they would use VTS to introduce new texts, use strategies as a tool for creative writing, pair it with reading strategies, and introduce the strategy of evidential reasoning. Although nine is almost half of the participants, I was surprised and impressed that not all participants felt that ELA was the only way they could use VTS in their classrooms. One teacher stated that she would use VTS to “introduce new shapes to her students during a math lesson to help them understand where in the real world they can find them.” Another teacher even stated that she could use the program as an icebreaker in the beginning of the school year to help build her classroom culture. The nurse at Rivington, Mrs. Graham, felt a tremendous connection with the program. She stated that she can use the series of questions in her medical office to help students better understand their illness and pain levels in a manner similar to that of nurse theorist, Martha Rogers.

The responses from the second question, “In what ways do you see VTS supporting the academic or social development of your scholar?” validated my beliefs regarding VTS. Theorists and professors can do years of research to prove the

effectiveness of a program, but until you experience the program itself, it is difficult to be a believer. I was confident that after experiencing the program, the teachers at Rivington would understand the importance art could have on the academic and social development of all of our students. Several teachers stated that they believe VTS gives each child a voice and an opportunity to be heard and allows their perspectives to be validated by their peers. Crystal, the Library and Media Specialist, believes that “VTS naturally encourages community and respect for the thoughts and opinions of others. [She] also believes that it will help build confidence in students who aren’t normally talkative during class discussions.” Several other teachers agreed with the fact that VTS promotes higher order thinking and can improve student’s critical thinking skills because of the emphasis on evidential reasoning.

I was very pleased with the outcome of the first session mostly because of the positive response I was receiving from teachers. Everyone seemed excited to return to his or her designated classrooms and begin their incorporation of the program into their planning. One of the participants during the first session voiced her gratitude for the presentation for the sake of her daughter’s education. This session was the first professional development session that Nurse Graham participated in this academic year. She stated that the presentation persuaded her to allow her daughter to pursue her dream of attending an institution to study fashion design. Prior to this session, Nurse Graham knew very little about the arts but felt that her daughter would have a difficult time in her future with a background in the arts. She believed that her daughter would lack the education needed to be a successful adult in the real world. In a follow up interview, Nurse Graham stated that,

“Now [she] can see her doing art as a major in college. It isn’t bad for her. [She] can really feel comfortable and now [she is] looking into the art curriculums and what they entail. It sparked a lot. The art can actually enrich her and she can improve a lot with and she doesn’t have to give it up.”

Although Nurse Graham did not focus her reflection fully on the VTS process, she was able to apply the session to her family and make a connection with her daughters

academic interests. The session opened her eyes to the importance art can play in the social and academic futures of our students and more importantly her daughter.

Several months after the first session, I reconvened with some of the teachers who had participated. We discussed how and in what ways they were able to incorporate some of the Visual Thinking Strategies into their instructional planning and daily lessons. Mrs. Sneid, a Fifth grade teacher at Rivington, was very eager to share her recent poetry unit. Her students were each given a picture of one Vincent Van Gogh's paintings. They were then asked to analyze and interpret the paintings in their own words and convert their thoughts into a free verse lyric poem. Below is an example of a poem created by one of Mrs. Sneid's students. Neveah was given Van Gogh's oil painting titled "*Fishing Boats on the Beach at Saintes-Maries.*"

At the Beach

Marine blue fills the sky
As abandoned ships fill up with sand
Vivid red crowds up upon the boats
Like lonely clouds in the sky

Waves come alive
As they crash furiously on
Golden yellow sand
All looks peaceful
All looks grand

Swift and sweet air blows
Sea smells linger on empty land
You can only see the colorful
Soul-less boats

Not one living breathing soul around
As the joyful sun smiles on us
Welcoming us to this peaceful place
Telling us it's safe
Telling us to join him in the fun
On the beach



All of Mrs. Sneid's student work was fascinating. The students used the artwork as a tool for self-expression. The artwork was the inspiration for the writing, but no two works on the same painting were alike. Similar to VTS conversations, the written responses represented the students' "backpack" or prior knowledge and opinions. This interpretation of the Visual Thinking Strategies was a powerful example of how art used in classrooms can not only have an impact student on writing, but can also be used as an avenue for the discussion of differences.

Ms. Eddie, a Kindergarten teacher at Rivington, conducted a similar writing assignment in her classroom. Ms. Eddie used the three Visual Thinking Strategies questions as a guide for her student's writing. She asked them to answer the questions in poem format based on what they thought was going on in the picture, what they saw that made them say that, and what else they could find. Her outcome was quite different than what she expected, but she was very pleased with their reactions to the activity. The majority of her students participated in VTS sessions and were familiar with the process. Their writing, however, became a list of what they saw in their picture. The fact that there was no conversation made the questions harder to answer in writing as opposed to the VTS format. Ms. Eddie was pleased that she attempted the lesson, and she planned on altering several aspects of it for future lessons.

These are only two examples of how Rivington teachers used the information from the first VTS session to influence their unit and instructional planning. I continue to share ideas with teachers and am eager to see what else they come up with.

Findings: Visual Thinking Strategies Paired with Student Art

The reactions and conversations during and after the second session were very different from the first session. It was evident that teachers felt a connection to the students work even if the child was not in their classroom. The level of engagement was higher and the feedback after the session was much more informative. In this section of

my findings, I am going to spend some time reflecting on teacher's reactions to the work itself during the session as well as their reactions after the session was completed.

I began the second session with one of my first grader's self-portraits. I chose Trinity's self-portraits because it provokes a wide variety of interpretations. As stated previously, the participants were unaware of the child's name, age, or gender. The more obvious statements were said first. Some stated that it seemed to be a girl standing outside because of her pigtails and the sun's placement in the corner of the image. The conversation became rich and exciting when one participant stated that the young girl looked sad because of the shape and color of her eyes as well as the tears shaped like hearts dripping down her face. Another participant disagreed and stated that the girl seemed happy because she colored eye shadow on her eyes and the hearts on her cheeks represented blush. The contrasting opinions stirred up a larger conversation.. One participant focused his comment on the background. He stated that the young girl in the background is standing on what seems to be a bike or a toy next to a car, and may be a representation of her sister to whom she seems to have an attachment. The assumption that the smaller child in the background could be identified as her sister or mother led to a deeper conversation than I was expecting. Participants began to discuss the possibility that this girl, if it even is a girl, may only feel safe near her family or sister and identifies herself with her sister. While another stated that the smaller girl in the background might be another portrait of herself doing what she enjoys most. The conversation could have continued for the remainder of the session. But what I found most interesting was what we can take learn from one child created portrait. I was unable to tell the participants if their beliefs regarding the young girl were correct or not, or even who the small child represented in the background was during the session.

Once the cycle was over, I was able to reveal the artist and speak openly with the participants regarding this piece of artwork. Trinity's teacher, Ms. Brown, was surprised that this was her work. After listening to some of the comments from her colleagues, Ms. Brown felt the need to speak with Trinity about her relationship with her sister and continue to encourage her to be a confident, independent young lady. I believe that there is a tremendous amount we can learn about a child's social, academic, and behavioral needs through their work, but with this process a lot of assumptions are made. Some

participants assumed that Trinity was upset or lost, which was not the intent of the artist. If Trinity were there to answer questions and present her work, the outcome would have been very different. One of the fifth grade teachers, Ms. Cangiolo, stated that Trinity's artwork reminded her that "we can learn about things in their lives that they can express through their art that they cannot with words." Art can be the means by which many students express themselves without having a conversation. As a child, it can be very frightening to tell an adult about an argument witnessed at home or a scary accident seen outside of school. Using art as a form of expression can be an outlet for some children who have difficulty finding the right words to express themselves.

The second artwork chosen was created by Darien, a third grader at Rivington Charter School. My prior knowledge regarding this specific artwork made it difficult to facilitate, but the conversation was insightful especially regarding this specific child. I had again been able to discuss with the artist their conscious choices in their artwork while the other participants in the session were not. This specific work was upsetting to some because of the black circle placed around the child's eye. One participant's comment focused on the different shades of skin color on the child and what that can imply for the child's perception of their placement and identity in society. Another comment focused on the symbol drawn on the child's clothing. This indicated to them that the child enjoyed games especially since the child placed themselves in front of a Toys 'R' Us sign. One participant also stated that the work seemed rushed, but was not sure if the black shape around the eye was intentional or simply carelessly colored in. This participant also stated that it was evident that the child put a great deal of effort and time into drawing the portrait in pencil, but when it came time to applying the oil pastel, the child's work became sloppy. I was very impressed with these comments because prior to asking the child his intentions with his work, I was wondering about those specific areas as well. As the facilitator, my reflection was very different from the participants. Questioning and the importance of questions was a huge takeaway for me. I consciously make more of an effort whether in my classroom, in the hallway, or even in lunch duty to ask more questions, with an emphasis on the appropriate questions. These two cycles of VTS with student work not only proved the importance of looking at

student work but it reiterated the need to form relationships with students and the need for monitoring student work through one on one conferences.

After using the VTS strategies with Darien's self-portrait, I revealed who the artist was. Most of the teachers who knew Darien were not surprised that this was his portrait. Darien's parents are currently going through a divorce and it has taken a toll on Darien emotionally. Darien's artwork was his way of asking for help, which was evident to most of the participants. Right now he is struggling finding his place in the world and needs the stability and love from his teachers and classmates. His teacher, Mrs. Thorpe stated "his work made [her] think differently about him and allowed [her] to become more aware and focus more on what is going on in his life outside of school." Similar to Ms. Brown, Mrs. Thorpe went on to have a conversation with Darien and set up a time every day during school for him to use art as an outlet to express his feelings and emotions. He could then, either decide to discuss his artwork with a teacher, or keep it for himself. This outlet has proved to be a huge release for Darien and continues to make him feel safe at school. If more opportunities similar to Darien's could be given to other children, there would be a huge improvement on the culture and the overall feelings children would feel coming to school each day.

The overall feelings about the session were positive. Teachers, as well as other staff members in the building, were able to understand how important observing and discussing student work can be. Ms. Martha believes that "this approach opens up the lines of communication and can help [her] build a deeper relational capacity with her students." Another teacher stated that she "is inspired to provide more time in her lessons to allow students the opportunity to give each other feedback and provide the artist or writer of the work a feeling that their work can give meaning to others." I admired the willingness of my colleagues to this type of investigation and am thankful that they were able to take away a new tool of getting to know all of their students holistically.

Further Studies

The focus of this study was to better understand how using the Visual Thinking Strategies accompanied by student artwork could give teachers a clearer insight to the

emotional, social, and academic life of the artist or child. The study focused mainly on the strategies promoted by the Visual Thinking Strategies curriculum and protocol. The teacher participants in both sessions were able to reflect on the program itself as well as how it can be beneficial accompanied with student work versus master artwork. Here the study's major findings are linked with questions worth of further investigation:

- **Student-Teacher Art Critiques:** After the second session with teacher participants, the overall excitement and eagerness to discuss more student work was infectious. Teachers took more interest in their student work and planned on discussing their work with their students within their classroom. Teachers understanding of the child's needs improved within this session and would continue to improve with an increased amount of opportunities to continue on this path.

Research conducted on student art critiques with teacher participants could explore this avenue even further. What would the outcome be if students were able to share their opinions and decision-making processes with their teachers rather than their peers, which is what most teachers frequently implement in their classrooms?

- **Diversity with Participants:** For the purposes of this study, the participants were all staff members at Rivington Street Charter School. The age ranges of the participants were twenty three to fifty years of age. The images selected for the first session were appropriate for this age bracket. The conversations during the session involved themes and topics not appropriate for school aged children.

What would the discussions entail with participants with diverse ages. Would the conversation be as rich or would participants feel restricted because of the language and themes prohibited to discuss?

- **Incorporation of the Descriptive Review Process:** This study focused on the

use of the Visual Thinking Strategies Curriculum and protocols. Teachers learned the importance of paraphrasing, pointing, and listening as well as how their student's work can have an impact on their instructional planning.

What more could we learn about the child if the focus was put more on the protocols of the Descriptive Review rather than on the strategies of VTS? How would the outcomes be similar and how would they be different? Which program would be more beneficial for teachers to use to better understand a specific child's needs?

The findings of this study are limited in that they are only based on the reactions of participants from one school. Nonetheless, the outcomes of the sessions were very telling. The incorporation and discussions revolving around student work can implicate how teachers 'behave with care' and approach each child with a holistic approach. The Visual Thinking Strategies can also be incorporated within any content area to promote a better understanding of the content and allow students to become respectful listeners as well as classmates.

Appendix A

Agenda for Professional Development: Monday, December 3, 2012

VTs Agenda

- Introduction- what is VTs?
- Video: *Thinking Through Art*
 - Teacher roles vs. Student roles
- VTs first complete cycle
- Reflection on first cycle
- VTs second cycle
- It's all about the process!
- How can you use VTs in your classroom?
- Exit Ticket

"To build a society that is innovative, prosperous, and truly democratic we need to teach next generations not just facts and skills, but how to learn, how to communicate, and how to think creatively, critically, independently."

APPENDIX B

Email Correspondence with VTS Representatives

On Wed, Dec 12, 2012 at 7:00 AM, <89.jgoldstein@heritageacademies.com> wrote:
Jordana Goldstein sent a message using the contact form at
<http://www.vtsweb.org/contact>.

I am currently a graduate student at the Bankstreet College for Education. I am in the midst of writing my thesis that focuses on using the VTS strategies with student work to better understand the whole child as well as the influence VTS may have on teachers instruction in their classrooms. I am writing to you, mostly because I am curious as to why VTS solely focuses on master artist work. Is there a specific reason as to why student work is not used? If you could please either put me in contact with someone whom I could speak with regarding this topic.

Thank you in advance,

Jordana Goldstein

Hello Jordana,

Thank you for your thoughtful inquiry. There is actually no protocol along those lines in our image selection process, it just happens to be what was/is most available to us: early years it was MoMA and Met collection. More recently, as we've been developing Early Childhood and Middle School curricula, especially as we start to work more with adolescents/young adults, non 'master' work is fairly common/prominent, perhaps even favorable at times. This is completely my take and anecdotal, so take it for what its worth. Our research and evaluation in that area is underway.

Another consideration is the role of ambiguity and intrigue in fostering a really robust VTS discussion. These elements are often more prominent (i.e. - easy to find images that contain layers of ambiguity and intrigue) with 'master' works.

I have sent you on to a couple of colleagues to see if they would like to add or modify what I have suggested here.

Best,
-Nick

Nick Gardner, Managing Director

VisualThinkingStrategies.org

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

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Hello Jordana--

Both Nick and Amy gave you much of the reasoning behind the use of art made by adults, usually professional artists (though some are self taught and "naive" as the saying goes.) We are looking for subjects that have, as Abigail puts it, "enduring interest." For discussions to be rich, images must have layers of meaning and ambiguity as well as inherent interest to the viewer. Increasing complexity among images presented over the course of time is necessary to provide appropriate challenges. Cultural, stylistic and media diversity are needed among images introduced for discussion, again over time, for beginning viewers to develop flexibility in viewing skills: knowing that they can make meaning of many different kinds of images. As wonderful as children's artwork is, it's virtually impossible for them to incorporate these aspects of art in their work.

Although only a variation of the first question--Tell me what's going on in your picture--is useful across the board with children from early childhood, as they enter the later elementary grades it can be helpful to ask "What did you do to make that happen?" after some intention is explained. And of course "what more can you say about your picture?" can be useful from early on. But that said, adapted VTS as a critique method starts to make sense when students actually have some command

of techniques and have taken time regarding their choice of subjects, projects, media etc--rarely the case with "assignments." Since lots of childhood art making seems to come from some internal impulse and instead of conscious choice making, it's a bit hard for students to be reflective about what they did. They don't necessarily want to think about it, and in my view shouldn't be made to. Let them go at it as much and as often as possible and let them tell you about what they have done, but don't submit them to too much pull back.

Adult artists also often make decisions that don't seem to come from conscious thought but that doesn't mean that others can't find meanings in what they do and choose to present. This is a fair way to look at their art--for meanings; I don't think it is for kids most of the time, although I suspect there are therapists who think differently, with justification. As Amy suggested, though, you can take the fun out of creating by making it too heady, and anything that makes a child feel that they should be doing something other than what they do in the realm of visual art making is counter productive.

Does this make sense to you?

Again thanks for your interest; I hope your paper writing goes well. I'm sure all of us would love to read the paper when done.

All best, and many good wishes to you and your Bank Street colleagues; it can't be easy working with children this week in particular--and for such a distressing reason.

Philip

APPENDIX C

Copy of Letter from IMP Committee Granting Permission to Commence Research

November 16, 2012

Dear Jordana,

Your proposal and consent letters and forms for working with human participants for your Independent Study have been approved. You may commence your work with human participants. If you make any significant changes to your work with human participants, you need to inform the IMP Committee in writing of your plans. Please place a copy of this letter along with unsigned copies of any consent letters and forms in a Permissions section at the end of your appendix. Keep the original signed forms in a safe place for five years.

The best of luck with your study. We look forward to having the completed copy in the Bank Street College Library.

Sincerely,

Nina Jensen

Nina Jensen, Chair
Integrative Master's Project Committee



APPENDIX D

Consent Forms for Research Involving Human Participants

November 11, 2012

Dear Fellow Teachers,

As you know, I am currently a student at Bank Street College completing my Master's degree in Leadership in the Arts. As part of my graduate work, I am writing an Independent Study, a requirement for my degree and a culmination of my studies.

For my project I have chosen to examine how the use of student artwork during Visual Thinking Strategies sessions may influence teacher instruction, implementation of lessons, as well as build upon their relational capacity with their students. During the sessions, I will conduct both written and audio recordings. Together these will serve as the primary data for my study. Every individual will be given a pseudonym and any identifying features will be disguised. The school and the classrooms will also be given pseudonyms. Audio recordings will be transcribed and pseudonyms will be used here as well.

In order to use the written and audio documentation, I need your permission. Please fill out the attached Consent Form and return it to me by _____. The study that results from this project will be housed in the Bank Street College Library. It will have a catalogue number and will be available to students and faculty at Bank Street and on Inter-Library loan. The material may also be included in professional presentations and publications.

If you have any questions about this project, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Thank you in advance for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Jordana Goldstein

Consent and Release Form

I have carefully read the information provided above and give my permission to use (check all that you are consenting to):

_____Written Documentation

_____Audio Documentation

I understand that my name and the name of the school and community will be protected by pseudonyms in the actual thesis as well as in any professional talks and publications based on this research. I grant permission to use the above noted documentation in the thesis document and in professional presentations and publications.

I have read this release form and agree to its terms knowingly and voluntarily.

Participant's Name (please print) _____

Date _____

Participant's Signature _____

Date _____



APPENDIX E

Parent/Guardian Release Form

Dear Parents,

As you know, I am currently a student at Bank Street College completing my Master's degree in Educational Leadership focusing in the Arts. As part of my graduate work, I am writing an Independent Study, a requirement for my degree and a culmination of my studies.

For my project I have chosen to examine how the use of student artwork during Visual Thinking Strategies sessions may influence teacher instruction, implementation of lessons, as well as build upon their relational capacity with their students. In order to examine this process, I will be using student artwork completed in my classroom as a tool to better understand their social, academic, and psychological being.

I would like to acknowledge your permission to use some of your child's written work, and possibly photos of them engaged in the learning process, in my final thesis presentation. Names will be removed from any and all student work and pictures, but the study will be kept in the Bank Street College library and available to be borrowed both within and without the Bank Street community.

Please sign and return this form to confirm your consent.

Thanks sincerely,

Jordana Goldstein

I understand that Jordana Goldstein, Master's Degree Candidate at Bank Street College of Education, is studying the affects of analyzing student artwork may have on teacher instruction for her Master's Thesis.

I give permission for my child's artwork to be used in this study.

Signed _____ Dated _____ I consent
to the use of my child's photograph to be included in this study.

Signed _____ Dated _____

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